

Focus on Retention: Why Do Students Leave Everett Community College?

Introduction

Students at community colleges are more likely to drop out of school than are their counterparts at four-year institutions. The reasons for this are several: community college students are more likely to be working and working full time, they are more likely to be unprepared academically, they are more likely to be first-generation college students, making the navigation of the college bureaucracy more daunting, and they are more likely to be older returning students who have been away from an academic environment for some time. These realities heighten the concern that community colleges have with student retention and prompt us to further investigate the things that contribute to student attrition.

The College explored this issue in a survey administered to students who left the College and had not returned. The telephone survey was carried out by Washington State University's Social & Economic Sciences Research Center in April and May of 2010. The College provided WSU information on 1081 students who were self-identified as degree seeking and who attended in the fall of 2008 but had not attended EvCC for the following three quarters. Two hundred and forty students completed the survey. The sampling error associated with this survey is 5.6 percent. This means that the percentages of responses in the total population (all 1081 students) may be 5.6 percent higher or lower than what is reported from this sample data.

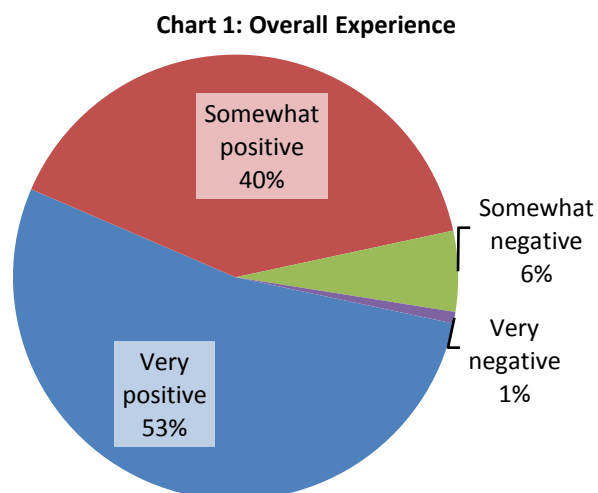
The survey was structured in a way that inquired about a former student's level of satisfaction with a variety of variables related to attendance as well as a series of questions directly asking about reasons for not returning to the College. Student responses were then linked to their records in the College database, so that relationships could be investigated between student performance and demographic variables on the one hand, and student satisfaction and reasons for leaving on the other.

Satisfaction with Experience/ Services

Students were first asked about their overall experience at EvCC. Did an overall bad experience contribute to the College's failure to retain them? Student feedback on this question would appear to give the answer of "no." See Chart 1. Fifty-three percent of students characterized their experience at EvCC as "very positive" and another 40 percent perceived it as "positive." Six percent reported their overall experience as "somewhat negative" and only 1 percent viewed it as "very negative". Aggregating these numbers, 93 percent perceived their experience as positive while only 7 percent referred to it as negative. Bearing in mind that all of these responses come from

students who have left the College, we most assuredly can conclude that an overall negative experience was not a major contributor to their decision to not return to continue their studies at EvCC.

Did perceptions on one's overall experience differ depending upon one's ethnicity, gender or age? On the variables of gender and ethnicity the answer is clearly no. On the variable of age, however, there was a statistically significant difference among those aged 23 to 30 when compared to everyone else. Those aged 23 to 30 were approximately three times more likely to report that their experience at EvCC was negative.



Students were then asked about their satisfaction with a number of components of their educational experience at the College. Responses appear below in Table 1. Satisfaction was highest on the variety of classes offered (93%) and the registration process (90%). Students were also quite content with the times at which classes were offered (89%), the quality of teaching (87%) and the number of online courses offered by the College (83%). Satisfaction fell below the 80 percent mark in four areas. Seventy-nine percent expressed satisfaction with both the financial aid office and career advising services. Seventy-seven percent were satisfied with advisors' help in building class schedules and 76 percent reported being satisfied with advisors' help in reaching their educational goals.

Table 1: Satisfaction on Variables

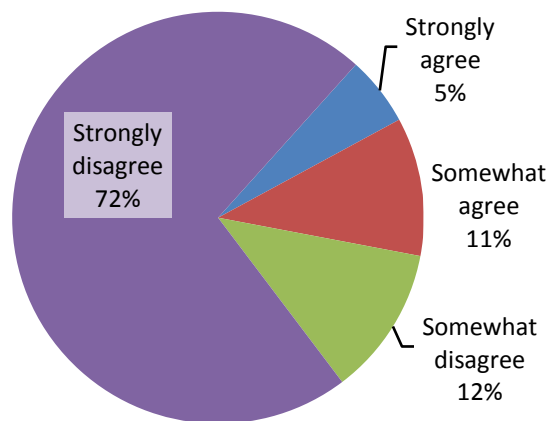
How satisfied were you with:	Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Total Responding
variety of classes offered?	7%	93%	238
quality of teaching?	13%	87%	240
times the classes were offered?	11%	89%	236
number of online courses?	17%	83%	151
Financial Aid Office?	21%	79%	134
registration process?	10%	90%	239
advisors' help in building your class schedule?	23%	77%	164
advisors' help in reaching educational goals?	24%	76%	160
career advising services at EvCC?	21%	79%	122

On those questions in which the satisfaction level was below 80 percent, differences of perception were investigated on the basis of ethnicity, age and gender. No differences were found among groups within each of these variables. Or in other words, regardless of one's ethnicity, age or gender, there were no statistically significant differences on levels of satisfaction on these four issues.

Reasons for Leaving

In addition to questions about satisfaction with college services, students were asked direct questions about reasons for leaving the College. Specific questions were preceded by a more general one: Did you stop attending EvCC because you were unhappy with your experience there? See Chart 2 for responses.

Chart 2: Unhappy with Experience



Seventy-two percent “strongly disagreed” when asked about this and another 12 percent “somewhat disagreed.” Summing the percentages, 84 percent report that they did not leave because of an unhappy experience at EvCC. Eleven percent “somewhat agreed” with the statement and 5 percent “strongly agreed.” Sixteen percent then responded that they left the College because of a bad experience. This negative experience differs slightly from the negative perceptions about overall experience (7%). That is, some of those who tell us that they left because of an unhappy experience at the College did not necessarily

qualify their experience at EvCC as negative. This might be because their “unhappy experience” was beyond the control of the College. Or alternatively, their negative experience may not weigh as heavily as their overall, more positive experience. In fact, 30 of the 39 (77%) who said that they left because of an unhappy experience at the College qualified their overall experience as positive. When possible differences related to age, ethnicity, gender and credits earned were investigated on this question, no such differences were found. There was one finding of difference: those with lower GPAs were statistically significantly more likely to leave the College because of an unhappy experience. This is not wholly surprising.

Moving beyond this broad, general question, we asked students about specific reasons for which they may have left the College. Table 2 below provides the details of responses to these questions.

The reasons investigated for leaving are rank ordered from highest to lowest based upon the percentages of those who said that it was an “Important Factor” in causing them to leave the College. Transferring to another college was the most common important reason for students choosing to leave EvCC, with 30 percent of students indicating this response. Another 8 percent reported that it was a contributing reason for their departure. Twenty-two percent responded that financial reasons were an important factor in affecting their departure, with another 15 percent saying that it was a contributing factor. Work-related concerns were cited by 19 percent of respondents as an important factor in their leaving. Twenty percent said that this was a contributing factor. Combining the “important” and “contributing” factor percentages, these three reasons for leaving were cited by 37 to 39 percent of students.

Table 2: Reasons for Leaving EvCC

I left because:	Not a factor/ NA	Contributing factor	Important factor	Total
transferred to another college	62%	8%	30%	237
financial reasons	62%	15%	22%	237
reasons related to my work	61%	20%	19%	237
I moved	85%	5%	10%	237
had learned all the skills I needed	82%	8%	10%	238
family reasons	86%	8%	6%	237
no longer interested in program	89%	6%	5%	237
medical reasons	93%	2%	5%	237
program did not meet my expectations	91%	5%	4%	237
academic problems	88%	9%	3%	237
inadequately prepared for demands of courses	90%	7%	3%	237
served in the armed forces	95%	2%	3%	237
didn't fit in with others in my program	97%	2%	1%	237
couldn't find affordable child care	97%	2%	0%	237
no affordable transportation	97%	3%	0%	237

The next group of reasons account for 10 to 18 percent of respondents' choices for leaving EvCC, when combining both "important" and "contributing" reasons. These include having moved (15%), having already learned the skills needed (18%), family reasons (14%), having lost interest in the program of study (11%), academic problems (12%), and being inadequately prepared (10%). Other reasons were cited by a small percentage of respondents (less than 10%) and will therefore not be discussed.

Of considerable interest in the survey data is the identification of those things that the College can do to reduce the number of leavers. Others, of course, are beyond the reach of the College. One of the most prominent reasons for leaving was to transfer to another college. Because no follow-up question was done, we do not know if these students transferred to a four-year institution or to another community college. So we cannot make assumptions about this issue.

Financial concerns were another frequently-cited reason for not returning to EvCC. On this issue the College can attempt to make financial aid services more efficient, which it has already begun to do. To some degree, however, this is outside of the control of the College too. This is also largely true of work-related reasons for leaving, the last of the three most frequently cited reasons for leaving EvCC.

Being inadequately prepared for the course work and general academic problems were identified by 10 and 12 percent of students respectively. The College has some capacity to respond to these concerns. EvCC can ensure that students are properly placed in English and math courses and can better advertise support services such as the Tutoring Center, the Trio Program, etc. However,

while the College has some capacity to act, these two reasons account for only 10 to 12 percent of leavers.

When differences related to gender, age, ethnicity and number of credits earned were investigated, few were found, or at least few that were worthy of reporting. Despite the literature which has portrayed male students lagging in retention and grade performance at colleges and universities in the US, women were more likely than men to say that they left EvCC because they were inadequately prepared for the demands of their courses (statistically significant). This might be an accurate depiction of reality or it may be due to males overestimating their preparedness for college.

Additionally, Students of Color were statistically significantly more likely to say they left the College because they transferred. While 35 percent of Caucasian students say they left to transfer, this figure was 51 percent for Students of Color. Plausible reasons for this difference are not immediately obvious. Students of Color were also more likely than were Caucasian students to say that they left because their program did not meet their expectations or needs (again, statistically significant differences). Twenty percent of them reported this while only 7 percent of Caucasians indicated this as a reason for leaving. Again, neither analysis nor reasoning lend explanations for this difference.

Conclusion

Students who were not retained by the College expressed relatively high levels of satisfaction with their overall experience at EvCC. Only 7 percent reported their experience as negative. When asked about satisfaction with specific services or attributes of their educational experience, levels of satisfaction ranged from 76 percent to 93 percent. Satisfaction levels were higher than 80 percent in all areas except: advisors' help in reaching educational goals, advisors' help in building their class schedule, career advising services and the financial aid office. So there is some area for improvement in the way the College provides advising to students. The College has already made some changes in the area of advising in an effort to positively affect retention. Mandatory online orientation and mandatory advising will be instituted in the 2010-11 academic year. Educational planners are being hired to assist students as well. Additionally, faculty are being asked to advise a specific number of students each academic year.

Changes have also been made in the financial aid office. Recently there has been a re-organization of personnel with the intent of making the processing of student aid more efficient. The service counter is closed one day per week so that the office can process more applications and there is now a student portal on the web where students can take care of some of their financial aid needs without office assistance.

There were three prime reasons for why students left and did not return to the College. These include transferring to another college, financial reasons, and reasons related to work. On the first

issue, we must ask if these students transferred because they were unhappy with their experience at EvCC. Among those who said that they left the College for reasons of transferring to another college, 29 percent agreed with the statement that they left because they were unhappy with their experience here (and conversely, 71 percent said that they disagreed with the statement that they left because they were unhappy). This 29 percent represents 26 students in the sample or 11 percent of all students interviewed. We can generalize to the larger population and say that 11 percent of all students who failed to be retained transferred to another college because they were unhappy with their experience at EvCC. This is a relatively small percentage but still one that should cause us to contemplate the possible reasons why.

Analysis shows that those who transferred and who characterized their experience at EvCC as unhappy were statistically significantly more likely to be less satisfied with several services or offerings here at the college. They were less satisfied with: 1) the variety of classes offered, 2) the quality of teaching, 3) advisors' help in building their class schedule, 4) advisors' help in reaching their educational goals, and 5) career advising services. On the first two points the "unhappy transfers" were only about 15 percentage points below that of others on level of satisfaction. On the three issues related to advising, however, they were 30 to 35 percentage points below others.

Financial concerns was the second prominent reason for leaving the College. Approximately 38 percent of students identified this as a contributing or important factor in their departure. Tuition is established at the state level, putting this outside the control of EvCC. Of course the College can mitigate the cost of attendance through the efficient processing of financial aid. This has been discussed above. Additionally, a well-funded foundation can offer more and larger scholarships to the students. Advancing the foundation, however, is a long-term process.

The College has even less capacity to affect the third prime factor affecting student retention: work-related issues. Thirty-nine percent of respondents reported this as a factor in their departure. The flexible scheduling of classes, including the growth of hybrid and online classes has been a priority of EvCC in recent years. And while the Early Learning Center provides day care for students with children, there are limited openings and the cost of care is beyond the means of many students. There is only so much EvCC can do to diminish this barrier for students.

These survey results reveal that many of the reasons why students fail to be retained are beyond the reach of the College. Because of this, where the College does have the ability to affect factors that impact student retention, it should devote the fullest of resources to these endeavors.